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SUBJECT: PUBLIC EDUCATION IN PANAMA

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. Panama's Minister of Education Miguel Angel Canizalez called July 27 for educational reforms at all levels--including elementary, middle, and high schools--in order to remain competitive. Canizales' remarks were in step with President Torrijos' proclaimed desire to advance educational reforms as an essential element to building a better future for Panama. Recent visits by POLINTERN to three Panama City schools, however, underscore the dire condition of Panama's public schools system and highlight the significant problems that must be surmounted to turn around Panama's lower public schools. While public schools generally are under resourced, marquee programs such as the Ministry of Education's "Connect Yourself to Knowledge" internet access program appears to be making progress.

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THE POOR STATE OF PANAMA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
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¶2. (U) POLINTERN witnessed first hand the poor state of Panama's public school infrastructure during her July 21 visit to three Panama City elementary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) apportions funds to schools according to the number of students enrolled. Smaller schools therefore receive less money than larger ones. The schools visited suffered from cracked walls, deplorably inadequate wooden roofs that are rarely maintained, and chipping paint. At one school, for example, children often became ill because the walls shed asbestos-like dust, a teacher said. Filthy walls, the dirt from which could easily be removed with soap and sponge, attest to the simple lack of adequate janitorial services. Some schools eligible for re-painting jobs every few years were in the process of being painted. Classrooms in the schools visited were not air-conditioned; at best, some classrooms had ceiling fans to circulate the stifling air. Lighting was generally also poor, and, especially during summer time when temperatures and humidity are highest, many teachers preferred to turn off the limited lighting so as to not further heat their already steamy classrooms. Generally, the recreational areas and labs were not well equipped in the schools visited. The science classrooms POLINTERN visited lacked basic lab equipment, and what limited equipment exists was in disrepair. Library holdings appeared quite limited, though reference books were available for research.

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A TYPICAL PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT  
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¶3. (U) According to staff at the schools visited, many of the schools' students come from humble families that lack the

means to provide for the most basic necessities for their children. Some children went to school with shoes and clothes that they had outgrown while others faced health or learning disability issues. One principal confided that she had two students with confirmed cases of AIDS, including one who had recently become an orphan. Students were often sick from stomach parasites, noted one administrator. Parents who were confronted with evidence of such health problems often deflected administrators' concerns by asserting, "It's nothing," lamented one administrator. Should parents not be able to afford eyeglasses, limited funds to subsidize their purchase were available, one principal explained. Though mandated by law to integrate special needs children, there are few qualified special education teachers. One school visited, for example, had only one qualified teacher for its fourteen special needs children.

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PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRAMS  
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14. (U) Adminsitrators at the schools visited complained that they received inadequate funds for the programs they were expected to implement. For example, with respect to the MOE's school lunch program, administrators explained that they needed to decide whether to provide their students less frequent, well balanced meals or simply feed their students something in order to be able to say, "They were fed." Marquee programs, such as a program to provide daily supplies of milk and access to the internet, do appear to be adequately resourced. Administrators acknowledged that the MOE did deliver daily half-pints of milk to every student, thereby ensuring a minimum consumption of calcium. The MOE's "Connect Yourself to Knowledge" internet access program aimed to equip every school with a fully-furnished computer room. Under the program, teachers and school administrators received training, and computer workstations had already been delivered to the schools visited. The GOP believed using technology would strengthen the education experience for all children. For exmaple, one school had just opened a computer lab with twenty-two workstations as part of the MOE's much touted digital age project "Connect Yourself to Knowledge." In another school, some desktops were not being used because the school did not have power cords long enough to reach all workstations.

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